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NOT BY THE BOOK.

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DESCRIPTORS- *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, *TEACHING METHODS, *LANGUAGE, *LANGUAGE USAGE, *LANGUAGE SKILLS, TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR, APPLIED LINGUISTICS, INQUIRY TRAINING, SOCIAL DIALECTS, LINGUISTICS, DIALECT STUDY,

RATHER THAN TEACHING PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR OR LINGUISTICS, NEITHER OF WHICH IS LIKELY TO INCREASE THE ABILITY TO WRITE, SPEAK, OR LEARN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE, THE ENGLISH TEACHER SHOULD GUIDE THE STUDENTS INTO AN INQUIRY ABOUT THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE. SUCH AN INQUIRY WOULD ACKNOWLEDGE THAT LANGUAGE USAGE IS DETERMINED BY THE SOCIAL SITUATION AND THAT MANY STUDENTS NEED TO BE, IN EFFECT, BI-LINGUAL, ABLE TO SPEAK ONE TYPE OF ENGLISH AT HOME AND ANOTHER AT SCHOOL. THE TEACHER SHOULD ENCOURAGE THE STUDENTS TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF DIALECT DIFFERENCES, VARIETIES OF LANGUAGE SITUATIONS, USES OF LANGUAGE, AND WAYS THAT "CORRECTNESS" IN LANGUAGE IS DETERMINED. BY SUCH QUESTIONING, STUDENTS AVOID REVIEWING THE SAME CONCEPTS EACH YEAR AND ARE INVOLVED IN PURSUING ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS THAT INTEREST THEM, THAT ARE SIGNIFICANT IN THEIR LIVES, THAT TEACH THEM TO BE INDEPENDENT THINKERS, AND THAT AFFORD THEM OPPORTUNITIES TO USE LANGUAGE AND THUS BECOME MORE SKILLFUL WITH IT. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "STATEMENT, THE JOURNAL OF THE COLORADO LANGUAGE ARTS SOCIETY," VOL. 3 (MARCH 1968), 25-32.) (JS)

Statement

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NOT BY THE BOOK

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In our back yard in Colorado Springs, there is a place for my children to play in the dirt with cars and trucks and to dig holes with their beach shovels. Greg was digging in a part of the yard where he wasn't supposed to.

"I wish you wouldn't dig there, Greg," I said.

"I'm not, Daddy," he said, "I'm burying this hole."

On another occasion, while we were all riding in our family car, Greg suddenly exclaimed that the car I had just passed on the highway had angels in it. His mother and I for a moment didn't know what he was talking about until it dawned on us that I had passed a group of *nuns*.

A friend of mine was transferred from Detroit to Cincinnati. One time he called information for a phone number. "The number is ah ay 7-3419," said the operator. "Is that R as in rabbit?" my friend asked. "No it's ah as in ahriss," she replied.

These are examples of word use perculiar to a region, group, or culture. The one thing they all have in common is that they are examples of usage.

As one whose responsibility it is to teach students to use their language effectively, it falls to you to make a choice as to whether you will teach that language using the findings of the science of linguistics or whether you will teach it in the context of prescriptive grammar. The choice you make will largely depend on your perception of your role as a teacher of English.

Certainly, we are all familiar with the traditional role. The teacher in this role corrects the student's language, corrects his speaking, his writing, his usage, until in the words of Hayakawa in *Linguistic Science and the Teaching of Composition*,

> "The most common result of the teaching of English and composition is not the creation of good writers and speakers, but the creation in most of the public of a life long fear of grammatical errors . . . To be sure, we help some of our students to speak and write better. But the majority of fair to middling students leave the English classes feeling that correct English like moral perfection is something they cannot hope to attain."

If, however, you do not see your role as being the guardian of our language, as being one who corrects or prescribes how one should write and speak, but rather you see your role as that of a guide who assists the students in discovering the nature of his language, in observing its behavior and understanding its behavior, in acquiring facility with the language, then your role would most closely coincide with that of the linguistic scientist.

Considerable research has been conducted to discover what value, if any, a knowledge of prescriptive grammar has. Generally these studies have all come up with approximately the same conclusion, namely: that there is no significant correlation between a knowledge of prescriptive grammar and the ability to write, to speak, or to learn a foreign language. And finally, the study of prescriptive grammar is of dubious value for developing mental discipline.

If these conclusions are warranted for the study of prescriptive grammar, then I would submit that research would arrive at the same conclusions for linguistics. For the study of grammar soon becomes an end in itself. Yet we already know that the student has an intuitive understanding of the grammar of his language by age seven. He may not verbalize this grammar but he understands it. Otherwise he would not be able to communicate with his peers, with his parents, or with his teachers. By age seven the student has control of the basic patterns of his language. Therefore it would be of dubious value to teach another grammar to students, even in the name of a New grammar. Of what value is a knowledge of linguistics?

Linguistics is for the teacher to know. Perhaps the greatest contribution of linguistic science is that it develops a new attitude about language. This attitude does not permit the taking of normative stands on matters of language in the name of grammar. With this attitude one cannot speak of what ought to be in the language, or make pronouncements as to which construction is better than another. With a knowledge of linguistics and the at-

titude that develops from it the teacher understands that he must look at what *is* about his language rather than what *ought to be.* In the words of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in *Linguistics: A Revolution in Teaching*, "The goodness or badness of language is not to be found in the linguistic form itself but in the opinion of those who use the language."

"Well," you ask, "if I am not to teach a new grammar, if I am not to teach another grammar, then what will I teach my students about the language?" I would submit that the teacher should guide the student into an inquiry of the nature of his language. Priscilla Tyler in an article entitled, "New Concepts and Context for the English Curriculum," appearing in the *English Leaflet* of the Winter of 1962, says, "What does it mean for the English course to be primarily the study of language? It does not mean merely the substitution of a new kind of grammar for an old kind of grammar. Rather it implies broadening the philosophical context of teaching English," I submit that this philosophical context is the context of inquiry.

What is meant by the term "usage"? When we talk about matters of good and bad, better and best, we are talking about usage. Evans and Walker in *New Trends in the Teaching of English in the Secondary School*, say, "The term grammar represents the system of language, the regularity which is built into it. Usage, on the other hand, represents the *alternatives* available within the system." "Usage," according to Postman and Weingartner, "is the study of the *attitudes* speakers of a language have toward different aspects of their language."

The key terms here are alternatives and attitudes. The speaker or writer must make choices of the words he uses, the constructions he uses, the emphasis he places on his language. These choices are what constitute his alternatives and these alternatives are largely determined by his attitudes and his readers' or listeners' attitudes. He must be sensitive to both. The situation then will determine the language the speaker will use.

Students quickly learn this, but frequently not through any conscious instruction from the teacher. All too often they learn that the way they speak and communicate with their peers is not the acceptable way in their classroom. All too often they learn that the way they speak and communicate in their home, in their

environment, in their neighborhood is not acceptable in the English classroom. Too many English teachers will correct a student's speech habits by saying something to this effect, "We do not say that in this class. We do not speak this way," when in reality he knows he does speak this way, his parents speak this way, his peers speak this way. Instead of "correcting" a student's language, let's teach him to be bilingual in effect. Instead of eradicating the language of his home and environment, let's give him another language. Instead of saying, "We do not speak this way," let's say "That's one way to say it. Do you want to know another?"

I observed a very perceptive, sensitive teacher handle a situation in just such a way. One of her students said in a rather belligerent manner, "I ain't got no pencil."

"That's the way you say it," she replied, "Do you want to know another way?" She didn't suggest that his way was inferior or become upset with his belligerence; instead she piqued his curiosity. With that kind of an attitude that teacher would soon find a way to involve that boy in inquiry into language if his first attempt failed. And once involved, he should soon acquire facility with language.

Many of our students, coming from various socio-economic, ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds—speak variant forms of English. Without eradicating the language of his home and culture group we must help him acquire facility with a standard dialect which in some respects may be comparable to learning a second language. This is what I mean by helping him to become bilingual. When we as English teachers attempt to eradicate a student's bad language habits, we in effect reject not only his language but we thereby reject him, his family, his peers, his neighborhood. One of two possible results will occur. First, the student may resent the rejection of his language and thereby counteract that rejection by rejecting the teacher, the school and all the school stands for. Or, he may admire his teacher and want to emulate his teacher and think that his teacher's language is the correct language and his teacher is the kind of individual that he would like to be. But when he gets home, and speaks a different language, speaks the language of his school, of his teacher, he finds that he is in turn rejected by his peers, or his family. Depending on the degree to which the home language deviates from the language in the school, the child could go home and upon speaking

as he was told to speak in school meet with active disapproval from his parents.

"You're not going to come home putting on airs here, buster," could be a kind of response his school language might evoke.

Or on the playground his playmates might deride him for his peculiar usage. "Listen to Tom; he talks funny." Either way the student is alienated from his home or from the school.

As teachers, we should help the student to recognize that language is a means to social mobility and we should help the student to acquire facility with his language without alienating him from his culture. Therefore, we teach him not a better way to speak but another way.

"Because students," according to Evans and Walker, "are more apt to make errors involving usage than grammar, usage and the doctrine of appropriateness are replacing grammar and the doctrine of correctness." It is essential then that the speaker have full control of his language so that he can select the right language for the given situation and thereby avoid what Donald Lloyd calls "the breakdown of communication" because the listener or reader has been offended by his choice of language. Harold B. Allen says in *Readings in Applied Linguistics* that "good language is language which gets the desired effect with the least friction and difficulty for its user." Not always will formal English or status English avoid that friction. Sometimes it may be the very cause of that friction.

What implications does this have then for our job as classroom teachers? First, let me re-emphasize that the teacher should guide his student into a discovery of the nature of his language, of the behavior of his language. In effect the teacher should structure the study of language in the context of inquiry. Two basic principles should underlie all teaching, and language study is no exception. First, the inquiry should involve the students. Secondly, it should be significant in the students' lives. The teacher should raise a number of questions about the nature of language and the behavior of language. He should encourage his students to raise questions about his language. These questions should be the kinds of questions that would foster inquiry. They should be honest questions as opposed to the kinds of questions that so often occur in the classroom which in reality are a little more than guessing

games. Questions such as, "What is the topic sentence in this paragraph?" "What is the subject of this sentence?" or "What did the little boy in the story do with the nickel he received for going to the store?" are in reality guessing games for the teacher is saying, "I have the answer. Do you know what it is?" Legitimate questions, however, enable both the student and the teacher to pursue honest inquiry into a given subject.

What kinds of questions then might your students pursue which would involve them, which would motivate them and which would help them to gain further understanding and facility with their language? Students recognize that there are differences in the language they use and the language their teachers use; differences, in other words, in language situations. Recognizing this, they might legitimately ask, "What are these differences in language?" "Are they regional, are they social, or are they situational?" Perhaps they are all three. What distinguishes regional differences? What are the regional differences? How do you recognize social differences in language? What identifies these differences? To what extent does the linguistic situation determine the use of language? Here the source of data might well be the mass media that surrounds us. The students might listen to television, collect examples of social differences, note regional dialects or differences in word choice unique to the geographic area. They might note the various language situations that exist on the news media, entertainment or whatever. They might look at newspapers and magazines. They might listen to the language in their home, the language of their peers, and note the differences in usage here.

Another question might be on the very problem of correctness. Who determines correctness? Is correctness socially determined? Is it politically determined? Is it morally determined? Again, their data would have to be gathered from their environment, the language situations around them. These are the kinds of questions that students can recognize as real questions—they are current, they involve language problems that all of them encounter in their lives.

Some students may want to know how many varieties of language situations there are. Is the language situation in the school different from the home situation or the play situation (that is, the language situations that they encounter at play) ? Is it different

for social situations? And then, to what extent does the social situation determine the language?

Still other questions that would support inquiry are on the uses of language. How does one use language, for what purposes does one use language? To persuade, to arouse to action, to entertain, to explain (certainly)—how do these uses determine the language that will be used? This would require an examination of language used in these various situations and a comparison of the differences of the languages used in these situations. Finally, another question might be "What determines appropriateness in each of these uses?"

It is apparent that in all of these suggestions, it is possible to pursue inquiry into the nature of language without having to follow a given textbook. None of these situations are really a formalized study of grammar as an end in itself, but rather the nature of language and the grammar of that language become significant in an attempt to answer the questions raised about the language.

The benefits to the student are, I think, apparent. First of all, the student is involved in pursuing answers to questions that really interest him. Questions that are really significant in his life. Secondly, it is not a repetition of the same old grammar year after year after year. Furthermore, the student develops skill in finding answers to his own questions. He develops a questioning mind and he learns how to find information on his own. He becomes an independent thinker, and an independent adult. In this age of the knowledge explosion, these skills are essential for tomorrow's citizen. He must know how to find information for himself. He must know how to pursue questions. No longer can a teacher serve as a disseminator of information. For that information soon becomes obsolete and with such a vast amount of information available, it is humanly impossible to disseminate all the information and consequently the information that is disseminated is fragmentary.

Finally, in the words of Hans Guth in *English Today and Tomorrow,*

> "the student . . . in the end has to learn not by 'the book' but 'by ear' with such assistance as an experienced and sensitive teacher can furnish. In matters of usage, neither rules nor statistics are a substitute for discrimination developed through much listening, reading and writing."

Inquiry into language, in addition to helping the student to understand its nature, will afford him many opportunities to listen, read, speak, and write, and thereby to acquire greater facility with language.